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ABSTRACT

An approach to teaching composition that involves small groups not only helps students to improve their writing skills but also teaches them to enjoy the process of learning. The approach calls for meetings with the entire class at the beginning of the semester so that students can become familiar with materials to be used in evaluating their writing. After two weeks, the students sign up for small groups and the class meets as a whole only occasionally thereafter. For the rest of the semester, the groups meet and discuss each member's rough drafts while the teacher helps the discussion as necessary and marks the original paper. Students are encouraged to write by preparing an outline, by getting the facts firmly in mind, by writing as rapidly as possible, and by concentrating on content rather than mechanics. Papers are short -- four hundred or five hundred word -- so that a student may go through the entire writing process each week. Such an approach motivates students and creates a sense of fun and worth. (TJ)

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INDIVIDUALIZING THE TEACHING OF WRITING

Sarah M. Morris

As a teacher of composition, I have often felt that I talked too much and covered too much material -- while students listened passively and remembered too small a proportion of the information I presented. Perhaps you as a composition teacher have felt the same way.

Over the years I experimented with many approaches to teaching comp, but none satisfied me. Then one day I paired the students of a class and asked one of the pair to read his paper as the other student looked on and marked anything, positive or negative, that he wanted to comment on when the reading was over. The students were asked to change roles when the first paper had been thoroughly discussed.

Gradually the room came alive. The students seemed more involved than in any composition class I'd ever had. I wondered how I could get in on what was being said between each pair of students and still not spoil their enthusiasm. This new approach developed into dividing this class into five groups of five students. Each group met with me once a week. After the other four students and I analyzed a paper, it was returned to the reader for study so that he wouldn't make this week's mistakes in next week's paper.

I refined this basic plan and finally developed it into an approach that both the students and I thoroughly enjoy.

Before you say to yourself, "Small groups? I can't take the time," please hear me out. There's almost no time spent grading papers because both teaching and learning take place in the small groups or reading laboratories.

With this approach, students improve their writing skills as well

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as enjoy developing those skills, an unusual experience in itself. This is evident from the gleam in their eyes and the laughter that is often a part of the small group meetings. As a group of students and I sit puzzling over the revamping of a sentence, the use of a word or laughing at some in-joke that has developed, I catch myself wondering if this can possibly be a session of a traditional composition class. I mention this involvement because I believe that learning should not only be a discipline, but it should also be a pleasure. In fact, it has been shown that students who enjoy learning, learn more quickly and retain what they learn more easily than those who dislike it.

This report gives an overall view of how this approach individualizes the teaching of writing.

The first two weeks of the semester I keep the students together as a class. During this time they study and discuss "The Material for Students" and write an in-class theme. "The Material for Students" is too detailed to include here. It has in it three sections:

1 - An eleven page, simplified, non-jargon discussion of mechanics which students have named "Bare Bones."

2 - A section titled, "How to Develop a Paper and Correct Mechanics." The first part of this section covers the use of the controlling statement,* a strictly structured thesis that simplifies organizing a paper. The controlling statement is very versatile. It can be used for simple two idea papers, or it can be expanded to cover many major ideas and their subdivisions.

3 - Sample Themes -- these themes are based on the controlling statement and also illustrate the use of various paragraph types.

*The controlling statement was devised by Dr. Glenn Mattot of The English Department of Colorado State University.

At the end of two weeks I have the students sign up for groups of five, the writing laboratories through which the course is taught the rest of the semester. There are five students in each group because there is time in a fifty minute class period for five students to each read a short paper and have it analyzed. Six groups of four students each is also a possibility.

The class meets as a whole occasionally as I feel the need for a class meeting or a change of pace. Of course, I also have individual student conferences. But with this group approach, conferences are not needed as often as when teaching the class as a whole because questions are answered in the small groups.

I ask each student to fill out a 3x5 card giving his name, address, telephone number, major and year in school. I also give the students my telephone number. This means that we can communicate between meetings if we want to. I'm sure that many teachers would not want to do this, but there is surprisingly little telephoning. However, I'm glad to be on the other end of the phone at the "moment of excited attention" when a student is in the process of writing and wants to discuss a problem.

This way of teaching is quite flexible. A teacher can spend as much or as little time as he wants to in small groups. This approach can also be used in both college and high school composition classes. It is easy to schedule small groups of students in a college class. And, with scheduling adaptations, it is possible to use this approach with high school classes too..

The Remaining Weeks of the Semester

Unless there are special assignments, each student meets his small group once a week and brings with him his rough drafts, the finished

paper and three duplicates of it. I read and mark the original paper, keying problems in mechanics to the appropriate sections in "Bare Bones." The student reads aloud from a duplicate, and each pair of the other students shares a duplicate.

I have broken the writing process into four parts: (1) organization, (2) content or development, (3) style, and (4) mechanics. During the reading the other four students and I mark good points as well as problems related to these four aspects of a paper.

During the discussion that follows a reading, the reader takes notes on the four headings that he has written at the end of his paper:

1. Organization
2. Content
3. Style
4. Mechanics.

If I don't jump in and take over the discussion, I find that students do remarkably well in spotting and discussing the strong and weak aspects of each paper. Their discussion is based on the same four points that guide the reader, and they use their marked duplicates for reference. At the end of the discussion, I, of course, ask questions about any important points they may have missed. Or I say, "What about this?" And they study and puzzle and finally find that there is nothing at all wrong with "this."

It's important that students have the chance to study four other papers a week rather than just one -- their own. Although they are able to understand principles of mechanics in examples and exercises, the problem comes in recognizing where to apply those principles in a paper. And students have a chance to recognize the application of principles in the context of five papers each week. As they explain and illustrate corrections for

each other, I may see the reader looking opaque and bewildered. I then know the others aren't getting through. So I usually take over. And if the reader still doesn't understand, I arrange a conference or ask him to stay after the class if he has time. I always explain the rationale behind punctuation and spelling. But if there is none, which is often the case with spelling, either the students or I can usually think of some way to help remember correct spelling. I also try to help students prevent problems. For instance, I have a way of preventing unreasonable changes in person and tense which I share with them.

I have used this four step approach for years, and I'm sure that many other composition teachers have also broken the writing process into steps. But I hadn't thought about what other teachers were doing until a few weeks ago when I was glancing through The Writer, a publication of The National Writers Club. I was gratified to find the following quotation in "The Director's Corner."

> I suggest you first prepare an outline, get all the facts firmly in your mind, and write the rough draft as rapidly as possible. At this point, don't be too concerned about the mechanics -- grammar, punctuation and spelling...Try to write from inspiration. All of the polish will come later.

I now feel on firmer ground recommending these particular four steps after finding that they reflect the thinking of a well known writer.

It is difficult to teach writing and equally difficult for students to improve their writing because so many different skills are used.

1. The organization of a paper requires analytical ability.
2. Thinking of details that develop the content of a paper requires imagination.
3. The actual writing of a paper in a style appropriate to the content and the audience requires a good vocabulary and a sense of sentence

structure -- and perhaps a bit of inspiration which is evident when especially effective words and sentences appear on a rough draft.

4. Using correct mechanics requires learning the conventions of punctuation and spelling of our language -- a skill very different from the others used in writing.

Because writing is complicated, I have developed the following specific ways of helping students work out each one of the four steps:

1. ORGANIZING - The controlling statement with its many ramifications takes care of this step.
2. FINDING DETAILS THAT CREATE GOOD CONTENT. Because students select their own topics, they have a store of information to draw from and can organize the detail in any one of several ways illustrated in "The Material for Students."
3. WRITING OR STYLE. For several reasons students improve their style when using this approach to writing.
   a. They are writing within an organization or framework and can relax and be inventive according to their individual ability.
   b. Week in and week out students help revise sentences and debate the use of words. Because of this practice, they may gradually develop a feeling for the rhythm of sentences and something of the knack of finding just the right word.
   c. They have selected their own topics and this in itself prompts good writing. According to Thoreau, "If anyone has anything to say, it drops from him simply and directly as a stone falls to the ground." As Herb Caen, the well known columnist of the San Francisco Chronicle puts it, "Just discover if you have something to say. If you have, the writing will take care of itself. If

you have not, you will spare yourself and the rest of us a lot of trouble if you say nothing."

The development of style is evident in the writing of a student I can never forget. He was a quiet, pleasant fellow, and his papers were dull and average. One day when his turn came to read, he announced his topic, "The Decor of My Hovel." There were a few amused smiles as he gave his first main idea, "Beauty." The basic color scheme of his hovel reflected the shades in his sleeping bag on the floor, Army tan and mud. And we then were helped to visualize him as he teetered on his orange crate table to catch a glimpse of a mountain top through a corner of his grimy window -- and so on he went with his clever piece as we chuckled in audible appreciation.

But why do I tell you this? Because he never again wrote a C paper. His papers from then on showed an originality that had been locked up in a dutiful student who had apparently cranked out mediocre but acceptable papers for his English themes.

So much for style.

4. CORRECTING MECHANICS.

Correcting mechanics is tailor made for each student. In addition to the group discussion of his paper, I have keyed his problems to the appropriate sections in "Bare Bones" and returned his paper to him. Then in his study time, he makes out a 3x5 card for each problem in mechanics. On each card he writes the appropriate rule in "Bare Bones," his correction and whatever else can help him understand the correction. He also makes out a card for each misspelled word and writes whatever he's learned about the spelling of a word. He may also use it in a sentence. Or he may list all the words that sound alike on

one card and use each in a sentence showing the differences in usage and spelling. These are his individual review cards. He should remove any cards he no longer needs, and his currect cards should be on those problems he is still having. Using cards this way, a student goes over each problem several times: Once in the group discussion, again when he makes out a card for it, and again just before he writes his next rough draft. Of course, he may review his pile of cards as often as he wants to.

The first two weeks of the reading groups, some students have so many problems in mechanics that I must keep the papers in order to complete the keying of problems to the appropriate sections of "Bare Bones." These papers are left in a special folder in the English office where students can pick them up the morning following the group meeting. However, after a few weeks mechanics improve so much that I can easily key all the papers during the group discussion. This marks the end of paper grading outside of class. I try to help students eliminate most problems in mechanics by midterm so that they can practice their improved mechanics the last half of the course and stabilize what they have learned.

I ask students to write short papers of four or five hundred words for several reasons. 1. Each time they write a paper, they practice all the steps in the writing process from selecting a topic through correcting mechanics. 2. They learn what their problems are on a small scale and can correct them in next week's paper. If a student writes a long paper, he makes the same mistakes at the end of the paper that he did at the beginning. 3. There's not time enough to read a long paper to the group. Half way through a semester I suggest that students who want to may write longer papers -- ones that can be read over two or even three class meetings.

Helping students improve their writing is a difficult business. It is best accomplished by giving each student as much individual attention as possible. But writing is not an exercise. Writing is meant to communicate ideas to others. Even though it is created in private, it should have an audience which responds to it, else the process of writing is sterile and artificial. Reading in small groups satisfies these two requirements: the need for individual attention and the response of listeners.

Reading to a group also motivates students to write their best. How do I know? Some students actually say, "I want to write apaper I think the others will like." For years they have written for English teachers and grades, and other students as an audience offer a fresh come-on. It's the actual reading that evokes the live response and the fun. Our football team had been having a hard time, and the last week end it had sunk to a new low -- a fight with the umpire! Monday morning a boy read a paper to his group that gave an interesting perspective on the afternoon's debacle. His paper rang with such conviction that it was impressive. And when he finished, we responded with different words but one idea, "You must get that in The Journal," the student newspaper. And so a theme became a Letter to the Editor. It went beyond being an exercise in writing to having worth and importance in itself.

So far as grades go, the evaluations in class serve as progress reports: They show where papers are strong and also indicate areas where improvement is needed. When a student asks me about his grade, which is really only comparing one student to the others, I ask him what his strong and weak points are, and he always knows. Then I suggest that if he can improve in his weak areas he can earn a certain grade. I want students to think "improvement" rather than grades.

My objective in teaching writing is to make each student increasingly self-sufficient. No composition teacher will check his papers as he writes essay exams and term papers in other classes. When he graduates from high school, hewill go to a job or to college -- in the former he may use writing, and in the latter he's sure to use it. And on graduation from college he will write reports for the local banker, perhaps General Motors, or he may even write papers in graduate school. In short, a student needs to develop writing skills that will help him through a life time of solving writing problems.

I have a few business men and women and secretaries in my classes. In fact, the very day on which I happen to write this, a friend in government asked me to send him "The Material for Students." He lives in another city and can't take the course. Then later in the day I met a realtor on the street. He had just finished a course with me. He opened his bill fold and solemnly produced a neatly folded slip of paper, one on which was recorded the A he'd earned in the course. With this visual aid in hand he thanked me for all he'd learned.

I tell these two incidents to show that comp isn't a class that people have to take and can then forget. It's important. Some people who feel they can't solve the writing problems which confront them take time in mid-career to do something about a deficiency that they feel is standing in their way. They come back to school to take comp, that much maligned ubiquitously required course in ordinary but all important exposition.

A SECOND OPINION

This report has been one sided -- my side -- as I see teaching writing my way. But what of the students? How does it strike them?

My school requires that anonymous check sheets be made out by all students on every course at a semester's end. Comments are optional. Here are the comments from one class of composition that was taught in small groups.

_____ "As a matter of pride we were goaded to write our best for the other students in the group."

_____ "I learn more about my papers from what students say than from a teacher's marks on a paper."

_____ "I even enjoyed writing and coming to class."

_____ "I learned to polish my papers."

_____ "Generalizations have to be backed by details."

_____ "I learned more in this class than in any other comp class I've ever had."

_____ "It's like private tutoring."

_____ "I've never written so much in any class."

_____ "I now get better grades on essay exams and term papers in other classes because I use the controlling statement to organize."

_____ "I feel better able to judge my own papers."

_____ "A great way to teach such an undesirable subject.

_____ "Efficient and valuable teaching method."

_____ "There was an atmosphere of learning in my small group.

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_____ "I wish all classes were taught like this one."

_____ "I loved it!"

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_____ "Bare Bones" was great."

_____ "We didn't go over the controlling statement just once. We used it enough so that we really knew it."

_____ "I knew I would have to discuss and contribute every class meeting, and this really made me get my act together."

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_____ "Getting one paper back before I wrote another was big help."

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_____ "I now write better than I know how!"